NCA
VOG FOR PGM/FN
BACKGROUNDER NO. 5-6178 OCTOBER 3, 1978
WILLIAM MARSH/EUROPEAN BUREAU

CRITICAL ELECTIONS IN WEST GERMANY

ANNCR:

TWO IMPORTANT ELECTIONS WILL TAKE PLACE IN WEST GERMANY THIS MONTH, AND THE RESULTS MAY HAVE FAR-REACHING CONSEQUENCES FOR THE GOVERNMENT OF CHANCELLOR HELMUT SCHMIDT. WITH A PREVIEW, HERE'S VOA CORRESPONDENT BILL MARSH IN MUNICH.

VOICE:

THE TWO LAND -- OR STATE -- ELECTIONS ARE TAKING PLACE IN HESSE AND BAVARIA, AND THE OUTCOME COULD BE DECISIVE IN DETERMININ THE SURVIVAL CHANCES OF BONN'S CURRENT RULING COALITION. IN ADDITION, THE FUTURE OF ONE POLITICAL PARTY IS VERY MUCH AT STAKE, AS ARE THE CAREERS OF SEVERAL OF THE FEDERAL REPUBLIC'S LEADING POLITICAL FIGURES.

THE ELECTION IN HESSE WILL TAKE PLACE THIS SUNDAY (OCT. 8), AND THE BAVARIAN ELECTION WILL BE HELD ONE WEEK LATER (OCT. 15). THE ELECTION IN HESSE IS REGARDED AS POLITICALLY MORE INTERESTING BECAUSE THE CHRISTIAN DEMOCRATIC UNION IS THOUGHT TO HAVE A CHANCE TO OUST THE SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC PARTY AFTER 33 YEARS OF UNBROKEN S-P-D RULE.

THE RISE OF THE CHRISTIAN DEMOCRATS IN HESSE IS ONE OF THE MOST DRAMATIC POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS IN WEST GERMANY'S POST-WAR HISTORY. UNDER THE LEADERSHIP OF ALFRED DREGGER THEY HAVE COME FROM A BARE 25 PERCENT OF THE STATE'S VOTES 12 YEARS AGO TO ALMOST 50 PERCENT OF THE VOTES IN THE LAST ELECTION, FOUR YEARS AGO. (OPT) THE SOCIAL DEMOCRATS RULE IN COALITION WITH THE FREE DEMOCRATS IN HESSE, JUST AS THEY DO IN BONN, AND ANALYSTS WILL CERTAINLY BE TRYING TO READ THE FUTURE OF CHANCELLOR SCHMIDT'S GOVERNMENT THROUGH THE UTCOME OF SUNDAY'S BALLOTING. THE NEXT

NATIONAL ELECTIONS ARE SCHEDULED FOR THE AUTUMN OF 1980. (END OPT)

IN BAVARIA, WEST GERMANY'S BIGGEST STATE IN TERMS OF TERRITORY, THE CHRISTIAN SOCIAL UNION IS GENERALLY CONCEDED THE LION'S SHARE OF THE VOTES. THE C-S-U IS THE SISTER PARTY OF THE CHRISTIAN DEMOCRATIC UNION. IT'S LED BY FRANZ-JOSEF STRAUSS AND HAS HELD POWER IN BAVARIA SINCE SHORTLY AFTER WORLD WAR TWO. ALL PUBLIC OPINION POLLS SAY THE C-S-U IS IN NO DANGER OF LOSING THIS ELECTION, AND THE ONLY QUESTION MARK IS THE MARGIN OF VICTORY. (OPT) MR. STRAUSS WANTS TO AVOID A POORER SHOWING THAN THE ELECTION FOUR YEARS AGO, WHEN THE C-S-U WON 62 PERCENT OF THE VOTE. THE SOCIAL DEMOCRATS ARE WAGING AN ENERGETIC CAMPAIGN TO KEEP THE C-S-U FROM PICKING UP A TWO-THIRDS MAJORITY, SINCE THIS WOULD GIVE MR. STRAUSS'S PARTY THE ABILITY TO CARRY THROUGH SUCH MEASURES AS AMENDING THE STATE CONSTITUTION. (END OPT)

THERE ARE, THEREFORE, THESE "BIG PARTY" CONSIDERATIONS IN THE COMING ELECTIONS. BUT IT'S THE FEELING OF MANY COMMENTATORS THAT THE PERFORMANCE OF THE SMALLER PARTIES MAY BE EVEN MORE INTERESTING.

ACCORDING TO THE WEST GERMAN CONSTITUTION, A PARTY THAT DOES NOT ACHIEVE FIVE PERCENT OF THE VOTE MAY NOT BE REPRESENTED IN PARLIAMENT. THIS SYSTEM GIVES SUBSTANTIAL POWER TO A SMALL PARTY SUCH AS THE FREE DEMOCRATS, WHICH, ALTHOUGH UNDER THE TEN PERCENT MARK NATIONALLY, HAS BEEN ABLE TO FORM COALITIONS AND THEREBY PLAY A ROLE IN HE GOVERNING PROCESS AT BOTH THE STATE AND NATIONAL LEVELS.

IT IS ONLY BY VIRTUE OF THE FREE DEMOCRATS' COALITION WITH THE SOCIAL DEMOCRATS THAT HELMUT SCHMIDT IS CHANCELLOR OF THE FEDERAL REPUBLIC. TOGETHER, S-P-D AND F-D-P HAVE SLIGHTLY MORE THAN 50 PERCENT OF THE VOTES NATIONWIDE.

SINCE THE LAST NATIONAL ELECTION, HOWEVER. THE POSTURE OF THE FREE DEMOCRATS HAS SLUMPED BADLY. IN RECENT STATE ELECTIONS THE F-D-P FAILED O MAKE THE FIVE PERCENT CUT-OFF, AND EVEN MEMBERS OF THE F-D-P CONCEDE THAT THIS COULD ALSO HAPPEN IN BAVARIA AND IN HESSE THIS MONTH. IN BAVARIA, THE FREE DEMOCRATS GOT ONLY FIVE-POINT-TWO PERCENT OF THE VOTE IN 1974. IN HESSE, THEY RECEIVED ONLY SEVEN-POINT-FOUR PERCENT.

THE FREE DEMOCRATS' POSITION IS FELT TO BE JEOPARDIZED BY THE EMERGENCE OF SO-CALLED "GREEN PARTIES," OR ENVIRONMENTAL GROUPS, WHICH HAVE SHOWN SOME STRENGTH IN RECENT ELECTIONS BUT HAVE NOT YET PASSED THE FIVE PERCENT MARK. THE GROWTH OF THESE GREEN PARTIES IS SEEN BY MANY OBSERVERS AS THE PRINCIPAL REASON FOR THE DECLINE OF THE FREE DEMOCRATS, AND THEREFORE AS THE F-D-P'S GREATEST THREAT THIS MONTH. BY PROJECTION, THEY ALSO REPRESENT A THREAT TO THE SCHMIDT GOVERNMENT, WHICH IS SO DEPENDENT ON THE F-D-P.

THESE ARE THE COMPLICATED FACTORS THAT MAKE UP THE MOST INTERESTING INGREDIENTS FOR THIS MONTH'S ELECTIONS IN WEST GERMANY. PUBLIC OPINION POLLS ARE FAR ENOUGH AT VARIANCE TO INDICATE THAT THE OUTCOME IN SOME OF THE MOST CRITICAL RACES IS VERY MUCH UP IN THE AIR (CANNOT BE PREDICTED). THERE IS NO SHORTAGE OF GUESSWORK AMONG THE NATION'S COMMENTATORS, BUT EVEN THE MOST SELF-ASSURED POINT OUT GUARDEDLY THAT THE VARIABLES HAVE RARELY BEEN SO GREAT.

-0-

GH/RD